

style, he provides what amounts to a balance sheet of union history. In outlining which paths led to organizational victory and which to failure, his approach has more in common with the models that economists construct than with the empathetic “history from the bottom up” that has dominated the study of American workers since the 1960s. His sober book helps dispel the illusion that labor’s power has ever been great or secure in this most capitalist of nations.

But Nelson’s stern antiromanticism also neglects the spirit of solidarity that at times has enabled American unions to generate a social movement. There is no place in his account for the 19th-century vision of a producer’s commonwealth, for the collective

rage that followed the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire, or for the mix of piety and ethnic pride that coursed through the California grape strike and boycott of the 1960s. Organized labor has a moral claim as well as an economic one, and the former has galvanized people inside and outside union ranks as much as the demand for higher wages and shorter hours. San Francisco organizer Frank Roney warned nearly a century ago, “A movement, however laudable and externally worthy, is bound to fail if it has no soul.” He would find an ally in current AFL-CIO president John Sweeney, a long-time apostle of Catholic teachings on social justice.

—Michael Kazin

Contemporary Affairs

THE APPEARANCE OF IMPROPRIETY:

How the Ethics Wars Have Undermined American Government, Business, and Society.

By Peter W. Morgan and Glenn H. Reynolds. Free Press. 272 pp. \$25

Between 1975 and 1995, the number of prosecutions of federal officials on corruption charges increased by an astonishing 1500 percent. Yet most informed observers would say that authentic corruption (graft, slush funds, and the like) *decreased* during those two decades, as potential wrongdoers heeded the cautionary example of Watergate. So what’s the explanation? Following the Gulf of Tonkin, the Credibility Gap, and the Nixon scandals, American culture changed. Legislators passed a slew of ethics laws, resulting in more violations, leading to still more laws and still more violations. Americans created in the process an Ethics Establishment—an army of lawyers, journalists, and consultants who make money and reputations on ethics scandals, and who further fuel our obsession.

Behavior that was once commonplace now is deemed unethical. In the political sphere at least, we have defined deviancy up. The resulting culture of scandal might be welcome if it increased public confidence in American institutions and decision makers. But the opposite is true: the more we focus on scandal, and the more ethics rules we enact, the worse voters seem to feel about leaders and institutions.

While there are few signs that scandal politics is abating—look at the Paula Jones embarrassment, the frenzy over campaign fund-raising, the myriad independent counsel probes and the pressures for more—a few authors have begun to raise questions about it. In their excellent scholarly study, *The Pursuit of Absolute Integrity* (1996), Frank Anechiarico and James B. Jacobs showed how anticorruption efforts in New York have led to ineffective governance.

Now add to the list *The Appearance of Impropriety*. In this lively book, Morgan, a lawyer in Washington, and Reynolds, a law professor at the University of Tennessee, describe our ethics obsession while railing against it. They particularly target the frequent alarms over improper appearances, a concern they trace from Henry Fielding’s novel *Tom Jones* (1749) through Watergate and Whitewater. The appearance standard, they argue, has destroyed careers when evidence later suggested no wrongdoing at all. Along with convicting the innocent, the focus on appearance sometimes helps true miscreants slip away: those who dilute their shame by arguing that their only violation was a trivial one of appearance, and those who artfully hide their misbehavior beneath a façade of propriety.

The authors conclude that “ethics is in danger of becoming an elaborate legalistic ritual,” one that stresses multifactor tests instead of old-fashioned moral values. “For government employees who must negotiate this ritual, the

result is frustration and alienation. For citizens who hear all the ethics fanfare but nonetheless see government 'as usual,' the result is cynicism and disillusionment."

There is no easy way to change a culture, but repealing or sharply revising some of the ethics rules would be a good start. Instead of making such recommendations, Morgan and Reynolds close by offering seven guidelines for better behavior, including "Responsibility Is for Everyone"—a sensible but not very pragmatic prescription. Still, *The Appearance of Impropriety* is a good and useful book, part of what should be a growing body of work on a culture of scandal run amok.

—Norman Ornstein

FOR SHAME:

The Loss of Common Decency in American Culture.

By James B. Twitchell. St. Martin's Press. 237 pp. \$22.95.

How do you write a jeremiad for an age that does not know the meaning of the word? Twitchell's brisk account of how we got from Adam and Eve covering their nakedness to Madonna hawking hers sounds the alarm about the state of contemporary American society, where we are more chagrined to be caught smoking than committing adultery. We have banished the age-old sentiment of shame in favor of an all-enveloping self-indulgence. Why feel guilty when you can feel good? Because, Twitchell argues, unless we understand and recover the social protections of shame, we shall pay a terrible price.

To give shame its due, Twitchell gathers evidence from various sources: biology (consider the blush and the flush, the instinct to hang one's head and hide—lose—one's face: "Clearly human biology and evolution have hardwired us to experience the jolt of shame for a purpose"); anthropology ("All cultures depend on shame; all cultures abhor shamelessness"); and history (he deplores the behavior of the prerevolutionary French upper classes, who were "immodest and haughty" and got what they had coming, and brandishes the enviable record of the Victorians, those overachieving blushmeisters).

Twitchell's book derives from a course he taught on advertising and American culture and on the seismic changes in marketing strategy since the 1950s. Then, we bought because we were shamed into buying; now we buy because we're so bullish on ourselves. Twitchell

believes that the trouble began for America in the 1960s, when an ethos of self-gratification first began to infiltrate the society. From being a pathology of the counterculture, it metastasized to the dominant culture, and we are all now ailing from its settled hold on our spirits.

For Twitchell, who teaches English at the University of Florida, the dominance of commercial television in contemporary life is the key to understanding what has happened to shame in America. Advertisers relentlessly woo the attention of an audience, especially an audience of the young and affluent. "In an electronic culture, the stories are controlled by those hearing them," and the message is predictably skewed, Twitchell says, "toward entertainment and away from shame." The playing field is leveled, not to say scorched; hierarchy is abandoned; authority, direction, reserve, and reprimand are forgone. About the force of the media and their indifference to everything but commercial gain, the author is depressingly correct, and the real value of his book is in its insistence, yet again, on advertising's blindness to anything beyond its shallow range.

Twitchell hits all the easy targets—O. J.



Simpson, TV talk shows, politicians, mega-churches, Hollywood and its calculated effluvia—but he has nothing particularly new to say about them. Instead, he repeatedly makes the same assertions about the deplorable condition of the society without developing his themes much beyond their initial sounding. As a result, the book feels both protracted and abrupt. Like a lively TV discussion—PBS, to